

Istanbul 2014

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ISTANBUL INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Turkey's most prestigious film event, the Istanbul International Film festival (5-20 April 2014) raised the curtain this year with the presentations of Honorary Awards to several Turkish artists: scriptwriter Umur Bugay, actors Sevda Ferdağ and Eref Kolçak, producer Abdurrahman Keskiner, musician Attila Özdemiroğlu and director, screenwriter, and producer İrfan Tözüm. The opening film was Stephen Frears' *Philomena* (2013), starring Judi Dench in the main role.

The international competition jury presided over by the celebrated Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi included Turkish theatre actor, Defne Halman; French writer-director Philippe Le Guay; former director of Edinburgh Film Festival, Lynda Myles and screenwriter-director from Rumania, Răzvan Rădulescu.

Twelve films on art and the artist competed in the Golden Tulip International Competition. One of Iceland's most stimulating filmmakers Ragnar Bragason, who is known for successfully blending comedy with tragedy, participated with his latest film *Málmhaus* (*Metalhead*, 2013). A sentimental comedy, the film follows a girl who grows up on a remote farm dreaming of becoming a rock star. Swedish artist Anne Odell's first film *Återträffen* (*The Reunion*, 2013), based on Odell's own experiences, but with the aim to create a work independent of personal emotions, was also part of the Golden Tulip International Competition. To discover the group behavioural mechanism, which may turn into one single pattern, during the rehearsals of the first part of the film, the director and the actors behaved as if they were fifteen-year-olds and learned to erase the status of the director, as explained by the producer Mathilde Dedyé.

Lenny Abrahamson, who was awarded with the Golden Tulip for his previous work *What Richard Did* (2012) presented his new film *Frank* (2014), about an eccentric band. The narrative follows the newest member of the group, Jon, a young and enthusiastic musician. The most interesting thing about the band is its leader Frank (Michael Fassbender), an intriguing character who wears a giant mask and keeps the band together with his bizarre rules. The inspiration for this idiosyncratic character is Frank Sidebottom, the stage persona of the late British singer and comedian Chris Sievey who led the punk band The Freshies and who was popular on TV throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fassbender supports a mask during the film and makes only small gestures and movements. Abrahamson who presented his film mentioned that all performances in the film were recorded live.

The young Canadian talent Xavier Dolan's *Tom à la Ferme* (*Tom at the Farm*, 2013), a Hitchcockian psychological thriller that had won the FIPRESCI Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2013 followed the titular Tom (played by Dolan himself) as he travelled to the Québec countryside for the funeral of his lover Guillaume. When he gets there, he meets Guillaume's mother, who welcomes him, and his macho older brother. It seems the grieving family is unaware of his relationship, but worse, the brother, Francis, soon sets out the rules for a twisted game that would control and at the same time excite Tom. *Papusza* (Joanna Kos-Krauze & Krzysztof Krauze, 2013) was on the tragic fate of the first Roma poet to ever write down her poems; the first to be translated into Polish and have her works officially published: Bronisawa Wajs, known as Papusza.

20,000 Days On Earth (2014), the debut feature of visual artists Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard combined drama and reality in a fictitious 24 hours in the life of musician and international cultural icon Nick Cave, as both the subject and the actor. An intimate portrayal of the artistic process, the film also asks us what use we have made of the time we have lived through.

Blind (2014), the directorial debut of Eskil Vogt, who has co-written many award-winning films, such as Joachim Trier's *Reprise* (2006) and *Oslo, 31 August* (2011) was an original film with a surreal atmosphere, sparse dialogue and humour, not just on seeing and blindness but also on solitude and writing. The director was moved by a story he read in which the protagonist was visually impaired and he started thinking about

how he could express blindness in cinema, a topic, which does not easily lend itself to visual narrative. A 20-year-old blind girl helped him and the main actor while she was working on the role.

Triptyque (2013), an adaptation of Canadian Robert Lepage's nine-hour stage play *Lip-synch* co-directed by Lepage, well known for *The Confessional* (1995), *The Polygraph* (1996) and *Far Side of the Moon* (2003), and Pedro Pires, was comprised of three sections on the lives of three related characters - Michelle, a literature enthusiast and bookseller recently released from the mental hospital where she was confined as a schizophrenic patient; her singer sister Marie, who is in danger of losing her ability to speak due to a brain tumour and Thomas, an alcoholic brain surgeon with shaky hands, who is Marie's doctor and eventually, lover. Loneliness, and particularly memory are explored skilfully in this touching film, the past and the present, fantasy and reality interlacing.

Competing for the FACE Human Rights in Cinema Award (jury headed by renowned Afghani writer-director Atiq Rahimi), Maria Binder's documentary *Trans X İstanbul* (2014) aimed at increasing the visibility of trans-individuals in Turkey; *Ai Weiwei The Fake Case* (2013) by Andreas Johnsen was a documentary on the Chinese activist artist; *Habibi bistanan and al bahar (My Love Awaits Me by the Sea, 2013)*, a docu-drama by Mais Darwazeh was inspired by the Palestinian artist Hasan Hourani. Explaining why most of the characters that she met by coincidence and included in her project were questioning existential issues with the air of philosophers, the director commented during the Q&A that the Palestinians were always asking existential questions, mostly because 'they are far from a comfortable life. Maybe the fact that the occupation and the occupiers are right under our nose causes us to express ourselves more plainly and clearly'.

Also part of the FACE Human Rights in Cinema Competition, *Farsh w' Ghata (Rags and Tatters, 2013)* by Egyptian director Ahmad Abdalla, a sequel to his *Microphone* (2010) was influenced by real events that his family and friends went through during the uprisings. A prisoner who was in jail along with dozens of others escapes amidst the 2011 Tahrir Square demonstrations. Now a free man, he wanders around witnessing the Egyptian revolution like a restless ghost. As he revisits the family and friends he has been separated from for so long, he finds that everything about life as he knew it has irrevocably changed. The film does not aim at documenting the revolution, but rather reflect personal emotions.

The Voice of the Voiceless (Maximón Monihan, 2013), a next-to-no-budget film about the exploitation of handicapped illegals in the US focused on a girl from Latin America who arrives in New York with the promise of a school for the deaf and mute kids, but falls into the hands of a gang and is forced to beg. The film aims at showing that slavery and exploitation are not realities of the Third World but they also exist in rich countries.

Following the traces of wartime atrocities in the Bosnian-Serbian border town Visegrad, *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (Jasmila Žbanić, 2013) exposed real events that happened to the lead character. Kym, an Australian tourist keeping a video-diary travels to the Bosnian-Serbian border, to a seemingly idyllic small town called Visegrad. After a night of insomnia in the 'romantic' Hotel Vilina Vlas, Kym discovers what happened there during the war. She can no longer be an ordinary tourist and her life will never be the same again. The first English-language film by Žbanić, who was part of the 2010 Golden Tulip jury, was premiered at the Toronto Film Festival.

In the Golden Tulip National Competition, Tayfun Pirseliimoğlu's latest film *Ben O De ğilim (I'm Not Him, 2014)* was the most outstanding film of the section. Following the screening, Pirseliimoğlu said that he was familiar with the film's character and that his previous stories also had characters, who wanted to be other people. He expressed the main point of the film, the character's desire to be someone else, with the words 'I am not myself, but I would like to be'.

İtirazım Var (Let's Sin, 2014) by Onur Ünlü was very original in the manner it combined social and political satire with humour through the character of an unusual imam. Ünlü had already won acclaim with his previous film, *Sen Aydınlatırsın Geceyi (Thou Gild'st the Even, 2013)*, the national Golden Tulip winner of last year.

Hüseyin Karabey's *Were Dengê Min (Come to My Voice, 2014)* approached the burning issue of the problems of the Kurdish minority through a simple story. While introducing his film, Karabey mentioned that there was much to be said/told in Turkey and that these stories should be told by those who experience them.

Documenting the experiences of a Kurdish family who goes to Ankara from the Kurdish region in the south for seasonal work every year, *He bû tune bû* (*Once Upon A Time*, Kazım Öz, 2014) examined the issues of class, lack of decent employment and discrimination against the minorities. Öz is part of the film while shooting, sharing the personal problems of the workers and trying to find solutions. Such close contact with the subjects makes the film more authentic and powerful. He intervenes in very few instances trying to situate the story in an organic whole as much as possible. Having lived with them for a period of time was one of the things that made the process easier.

Kusursuzlar (*The Impeccables*, 2013), the award-winning film of Ramin Matin was shown Out of Competition. The director commented that the name of the film was ironic and the aim was to underscore the state of perfection and impeccability expected from women in the Turkish society in line with traditions. Following the screening, the screenwriter and producer Emine Yıldırım expressed that the idea for the story was based on two situations; that sisterhood is built on two extremes, love and hate; and that she wanted to rebel against the lack of women stories in Turkish cinema by putting two women in the centre of the film.

Nergis Hanım (*Mrs. Nergis*, Görkem Şarkan, 2014) was a poignant story of the difficult relationship between an Alzheimer patient and her middle-aged and unemployed son who is responsible for taking care of her. Inspired by the experiences of the director's grandmother and uncle, the film questions duty and justice in a very sensitive manner with remarkable performances.

With the aim of offering a new perspective on the unforgettable films of the country in this 100th year of Turkish cinema, the 'What A Pair' section paired well-known films from different periods or genres such as *İstanbul'un Fethi* (*The Fall of Constantinople*, Arakon, 2011) and *Karanlık Sular* (*The Serpent's Tale*, Ataman, 1995); *Tabutta Rövaşata* (*Somersault in A Coffin*, Zaim, 1996) and *Araf* (*Somewhere in Between*, Ustaoglu, 2012); *Cazibe Hanım'ın Gündüz Düşleri* (*Daydreams of Miss Cazibe*, Tözüm, 1993) and *Aaahh Belinda!* (Yılmaz, 1986); *Beklenen Şarkı* (*The Long Awaited Song*, Ayanoglu & Arıburnu & Sonku, 1953) and *Mavi Boncuk* (*Blue Eyes*, Eğilmez, 1974); *Otobüs* (*The Bus*, Okan, 1976) and *Fotoğraf* (*Photograph*, Öz, 2001). However, the 'pairing' was often rather far-stretched and to make a connection between the pair was difficult.

Parallel to the program, the festival organised a series of panels such as 'Fantasy and Horror in Turkish Cinema', the genres that have been active but ignored. This panel dwelled on the development of horror film in Turkey from the past to the present, national experiments and the audience reception. Recent box office successes such as *Dabbe* and *Semum* (Karacadağ, 2006 and 2008 respectively) were mentioned along with some of the disdained films of the past that have now become cult classics such as *Şeytan* (*The Devil*, Metin Erksan, 1974) (plagiarized and Turkified version of *The Exorcist*, Friedkin, 1973).

Focusing on 'What's Happening in Cinema in Turkey?' other panels concentrating on the state of political cinema (a conversation between Kurdish filmmaker Kazım Öz and director of *Tepenin Tepenin Ardı* (*Beyond the Hill*, Emin Alper, 2012); art cinema; the video art; 'Kitsch and Queer' in Turkish Cinema and the comedy genre were held, mostly during the first week, a disadvantage for the foreign guests arriving the second week.

Known for his films *Vodka Lemon* (2003) and *Kilometre Zero* (2005), writer and director Hiner Saleem's latest film *My Sweet Pepper Land* (2013) shown in the 'From the World of Festivals' section was a resistance film, shot in the western genre. Commenting on his choice of the genre, Saleem emphasized that the situation in Kurdistan was reminiscent of the eighteenth century West in America: 'Laws and the rule of law are being newly established. That is where the idea of the western came from. Also, my previous film *Si tu meurs, je te tue* (*If You Die, I'll Kill You*, 2011) was very heavy. I wanted my next film to be light and easy to shoot... The film does not advocate a hard ideology, just the opposite. I wanted to draw the portrait of a Kurdistan that is becoming free from a happy perspective... Democracy can never take place in the Middle East without gender equality... The freedom of women is essential for the freedom of Kurdish society. I hope the next generation will be more sensitive'.

Saturday, the 12th April was dedicated to Polish Cinema in celebration of the 600th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Poland and Turkey and *Ida* (2013), debut feature of Polish-born British filmmaker Pawel Pawlikowski was one of the most popular films. Pawlikowski shot the film in black & white and 4:3 format because his own memories of that time, his photo albums and the films that

he'd seen were in black & white and it facilitated the meditative function he was aiming for by awakening a feeling of distance. He wanted to make a film that was a meditation and his preference for a minimal, rather than classical or dramatic structure, was based on this wish. He only selected music that could be heard during that era and that these decisions had already been made in the scripting process.

An anthology of Polish experimental animation films, consisting of three programs with a total of 40 films was also programmed. Parallel to this section, one of Polish animation's most creative directors, Mariusz Wilczyński and film critic Adriana Prodeus held a panel, moderated by animation artist Berat Işık, discussing the relationship between experimental animation and the visual arts.

In the 'Certified Copy' section, the festival screened the restored versions of lost, worn, or aged classic films that have left a mark in film history, such as Volker Schlöndorff's *Baal* (1970), viewed 40 years after its first screening and William Friedkin's cult film *Sorcerer* (1977).

The "In Memoriam" section remembered well-known names we have lost within the previous year presenting one work of each master - Philip Seymour Hoffman, Patrice Chéreau, Miklós Jancsó, Peter O'Toole, Bigas Luna, Harold Ramis, Alain Resnais, and the legendary Turkish actor Tuncel Kurtiz (with the screening of *Sürü* (*The Herd*, 1979) by Zeki Ökten. In memory of Peter O'Toole, who passed away last year, the most famous epic and the Orientalist classic by David Lean, *Lawrence of Arabia* was also screened.

In addition to categories specific to this year, such as 'What a Pair', 'The First World War and Modernity in Crisis', 'MK2 - 40 Years' (a selection of films from this year's Honorary Award-winner Marin Karmitz's company), 'War and Remembrance: Films of Aleksey Guerman', panels such as 'Meetings on the Bridge' were also held. The first film-makers of the Balkans, the Yanaki and Milton Manaki brothers were remembered by screening all of their restored films for the centenary of Turkish cinema as these were made within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. A panel was organized on the legacy of the Manaki brothers, another one of those exciting events, unfortunately missed by the foreign guests.

The winner of the Golden Bear at Berlin and the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar for *A Separation* and competing for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival with his subsequent feature *The Past*, Iranian director Asghar Farhadi gave a master class discussing his films and his approach to cinema. Farhadi emphasised that he places great importance on the writing process, which he begins with a mental image. He also tries to keep an equal distance from all of the characters in his films. His next film will also be taking place in Europe, but he is planning to return to Iran for his following project, as well as for many other films that he plans to make.

The closing ceremony commenced by the screening of the short film prepared about the festival. Then, the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) presented writer, critic, translator, and historian Giovanni Scognamiglio from Turkey with a plaque to honour his 85th birthday and contribution to film history. French producer Marin Karmitz received the festival's Honorary Award. Karmitz thanked the directors he worked with and humbly remembered Yılmaz Güney, who he said was especially instrumental in his receiving this award.

References

Awards:

Golden Tulip International Competition
Blind (Eskil Vogt)

Golden Tulip International Competition Special Jury Prize
Papusza (Joanna Kos-Krauze and Krzysztof Krauze)

Golden Tulip National Competition Best Film
Ben O Değilim (*I Am Not Him*, Tayfun Pirselimoglu)

Best Director
Onur Ünlü (*İtirazım Var / Let's Sin*)

Best Actress
Vahide Perçin (*Ayhan Hanım*)

Best Actor
Serkan Keskin (*İtirazım Var / Let's Sin*)

Best Screenplay
Tayfun Pirselimoglu (*Ben O Değilim / I Am Not Him*)

Best Director of Photography
Ahmet Sesigürçil (*Silsile / Consequences*)

Best Music shared by
Ali Tekbaş, Serhat Bostancı, A. İmran Erin (*Were Denge Min / Come To My Voice*) and Giorgos Komendakis (*Ben O Değilim / I Am Not Him*)

Best Editing
Reha Erdem (*Şarkı Söyleyen Kadınlar / Singing Women*)

Special Prize of the Jury
He Bû Tune Bû (*Once Upon A Time*, Kazım Öz)

Seyfi Teoman Best Debut Film Prize
Nergis Hanım (*Mrs. Nergis*, Görkem Şarkan)

FACE – Human Rights
L'image manquante (*Missing Picture*, Rithy Panh)
Special Mention
Trans X İstanbul (Maria Binder)

FIPRESCI
He Bû Tune Bû (*Bir Varmış Bir Yokmuş / Once Upon a Time*, (Kazım Öz)

People's Choice
International:
Tom à la ferme (*Tom in the Farm*, Xavier Dolan)

National
Were Denge Min (*Sesime Gel, Come to My Voice*, Hüseyin Karabey)

Cineuropa:
Were Denge Min (*Sesime Gel, Come to My Voice*, Hüseyin Karabey)

Author Information

Gönül DÖNMEZ-COLIN is an independent researcher and writer whose publications include *Women, Islam and Cinema, Cinemas of the Other: A personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia, Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East* (ed.); *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (Reaktion Books), and *Routledge Dictionary of Turkish Cinema* (2014).